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SUBJECT: WOMEN ACTIVISTS PRESS FOR MORE MUNICIPAL COUNCIL SEATS

REF: A. AMMAN 1430

B. AMMAN 1826

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b and d).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Women's rights activists are calling for parliament to expand quotas that guarantee women's representation in municipal councils and the national parliament. The government agrees, at least for the municipal level, and the municipal elections law that it plans to submit to parliament reportedly calls for a 20 percent quota in municipal councils. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Jordanian women's rights activists are calling for parliament to include a women's quota in forthcoming amendments to the municipal government law. Currently, there is no such quota for municipal councils. Senator and Secretary General of the Jordanian National Forum for Women

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(JNFW) Mai Abdul Samen led the consensus among post's contacts on women's issues, calling for a 20 percent quota. In February, JNCWA formally presented to PM Bakheet a proposal that also endorsed a 20 percent quota for women on the municipal councils. NOTE: At present, the GOJ Executive appoints all mayors, and half of municipal council members. The government has drafted, but not yet publicized, a bill to amend the municipal government law, and reportedly to provide for the popular election of all mayors and all council members, except in the case of Amman. However, the government may be considering postponing submission of this bill to parliament (ref B.) END NOTE.

¶3. (SBU) The JNCWA proposal would provide at least one seat reserved for women out of every five seats on a municipal council. For example, councils of five or fewer members would have one seat for women, councils of 21-25 members, five seats for women. JNCWA's proposal also would provide for free competition between candidates, both men and women, for seats not designated for women. More than 20 women's organizations banded together with JNCWA and JNFW to lobby for quotas.

¶4. (C) In presenting its call for quotas, the JNCWA rejected the idea of the GOJ appointing women. In the last municipal elections in 2003, only five women won their seats outright, with an additional 99 appointed onto councils and one woman appointed mayor of al-Hasa, a small village located in southern Jordan near Tafila. NOTE: During a recent visit to that region, Poloff met al-Hasa's mayor, Rana al-Hajaya. An engineer by profession, prior to being appointed mayor, her energy and dedication to her position have won the hearts of al-Hasa's predominantly Bedouin population and advanced the role of women in her community. The governor of Tafila mentioned that he planned to endorse her bid to run for mayor in the next municipal elections, which have not been scheduled yet. END NOTE.

¶5. (SBU) The women,s activists were pushing on an open door with their call on the government for a quota at the municipal level. The report of the National Agenda Commission endorsed efforts to increase the representation of women in elected bodies, and we understand the GOJ was already planning to include this provision in its reformed municipal elections bill even before JNCWA launched its campaign.

¶6. (SBU) According to Senator Mai, if parliament approves the proposed 20 percent set-aside for municipal councils, the women,s groups intend to lobby the GOJ to include similar provisions in other reform legislation it is drafting. The activists will call for the government,s anticipated new legislation on political parties to provide for women,s places on parties, executive boards. Finally, they will press the GOJ to expand the women,s quota in the national parliament from the current five percent to twenty percent. FM Al-Khatib told Ambassador the government did in fact intend to include a 20 percent quota for national elections in the electoral reform bill it plans to submit to parliament.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: While NGO contacts expect the quota proposal to prevail in a reformed municipal elections system, achieving an expanded quota in parliament will be a greater challenge. Until more women are given the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities in government, it will be slow going for women's representation beyond mandated quotas. END COMMENT.

HALE